



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Sacramento Fish & Wildlife Office
Species Account
CALIFORNIA BROWN PELICAN
Pelecanus occidentalis californicus



CLASSIFICATION: RECOVERED/DELISTED

Federal Register Notice: 74:59443; November 17, 2009

www.fws.gov/policy/library/2009/E9-27402.html

www.fws.gov/policy/library/2009/E9-27402.pdf (261 KB)

With removal of the brown pelican from the list of threatened and endangered species, federal agencies will no longer be required to consult with the Service to ensure any action they authorize, fund, or carry out will not harm the species. However, additional federal laws, such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Lacey Act, will continue to protect the brown pelican, its nests and its eggs.

The pelican's recovery is largely due to the federal ban on the general use of the pesticide DDT in 1972. This action was taken after former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Rachel Carson (www.fws.gov/rachelcarson/) published *Silent Spring* and alerted the nation to the widespread dangers associated with unrestricted pesticide use. Read [news release](#) from Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office.

DELISTING MONITORING PLAN: Draft Post-Delisting Monitoring Plan for the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) www.fws.gov/policy/library/2009/E9-23557.html
www.fws.gov/policy/library/2009/E9-23557.pdf (55 KB)

DESCRIPTION

Brown Pelicans are large birds. Adults weigh about 2-5 kilograms. (About 4.5-11 pounds) Their wingspan is over 2 meters. (About 6.5 feet) Males are larger than females.

Brown Pelicans are smaller than white ones, but CA Brown Pelicans are larger than other browns. Brown Pelicans have keen eyesight. As they fly over the ocean, they can spot a school of small fish, or even a single fish. Diving steeply into the water, they come up with a mouthful of fish. Air sacs beneath their skin cushion the impact and help them come to the surface.

Adults are large, grayish-brown birds with long, pouched bills. They have a white or yellowish head and dark body. Immature birds are dark with a white belly.

Brown Pelicans make spectacular headfirst dives into the water to catch fish. They have long bills with big pouches for catching and holding the fish. In California, they feed on sardines, mackerels and anchovies.

Pelicans breed in colonies on islands without mammal predators. They build nests of sticks on the ground. All courtship happens at the nest site.

Normal clutch size is three eggs. These are laid in March or April. Both parents take turns sitting on the eggs and feeding the chicks.

Adults have few predators. Once in a while, a shark will attack when they dive. The main threat is to eggs. Other birds, raccoons, cats and dogs are some of the egg predators.

DISTRIBUTION

Non-breeding CA Brown Pelicans range from the Gulf of California to southern British Columbia. They nest on islands in the Gulf of California and along the coast to West Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands. They are rarely seen either inland or far out at sea. See review at ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc1039.pdf for detailed, up-to-date distribution information.

THREATS

Pelicans depend on anchovies and sardines. These have declined due to over-fishing. The number of chicks born each year also varies depending climate changes. Pelicans are also threatened by the oil spills, entanglement with hooks and fishing line, and disease outbreaks from overcrowding.

However, the biggest threat to Brown Pelicans was the pesticide DDT. Brown Pelicans were listed as endangered in 1970. DDT was banned in 1972. By 1985, Atlantic Coast Brown Pelicans had recovered significantly. They were removed from the endangered species list. Now, pelicans in other places, including California, have recovered too, and delisted.

REFERENCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NOTE: There is a special CA brown pelican species account for 4th, 5th and 6th grade students. See www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/animal_spp_acct/ca_brown_pelican_kf.htm

ECOS (Environmental Conservation Online System) [Species Profile](#).

Thelander, C. ed. 1994. Life on the edge: a guide to California's endangered natural resources. BioSystem Books. Santa Cruz, CA. p 132-135.

See review at ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc1039.pdf for an extensive list of references.

Credits: Brown pelican, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service photo

Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2605
Sacramento, California 95825
Phone (916) 414-6600
FAX (916) 414-6713

Last updated February 5, 2010